

Northwest 301

Chapter 301

Anyway, we had to deal with a few smugglers while wondering how to get to Roahn. But who would've thought we would meet the Captain here?

This was absolutely reckless of you. Roahn is famous for having the tightest security among all imperial cities.

So we noticed But what could we do? If you truly were dead, the least we wanted to do was to retrieve your body

What nonsense

When we were in prison, that was what bothered me the most. We thought that our Captain had been beheaded and your body wasn't given proper burial. After all, those damn imperial bastards staked our heads in the South, so what would be stopping them from doing the same here in the Empire Demons On that damp floor, every night, every time I fell asleep, I had the same nightmare. I saw the Captain's face, skewered through the teeth, looking at me

Glancing at Lil, Jericho muttered.

That's right What does it matter whether the Captain is a woman or not? What's the big deal? You're alive and we'll like this

The fact that you keep commenting on it, makes it sound to me that it is a big deal.

Oh, no.

Jericho, who was scratching the back of his head in embarrassment, asked.

But why, why did you trick us?

For the very reason you're making such a big deal out of it.

No, I never thought that

I guess we should stop talking about my identity. Your Captain was Lil Schweiz, not some random guy.

Alain tapped Jericho on the shoulder. In fact, Alain didn't look very confident either, but Jericho lowered his head as if he was being pushed away.

That was rude of me.

Along with the burning firewood, other sounds rose in the dawning silence; The sound of the wind seeping through the leaves, the sound of birds leaping from tree branches, and the sound of water flowing somewhere in the distance.

Lil spoke in the humid forest air.

Just to tell you in advance, I'm not going back. I have work to do here.

What's going on?

Regardless of the damages, the Navy has become furious and will turn the Ingres Sea upside down at any given time. War is on the horizon, but Im trying to drag it out as long as possible.

How can the Captain alone achieve such an incredible undertaking?

I have the Admiral, so what cant I do? I have to try everything.

..?

Alain mustve noticed her prevarication and narrowed his eyes at her.

I cant do it alone. But because there are people who think like me, I could start from there.

Lil honestly thought that was true.

Me alone might not be anything special. But like Levi or Marie, there are people I could never have imagined existing in my life in the Empire. Maybe I lost hope too quickly in the past because I was young and narrow-minded. I thought that what I saw and experienced was everything that this damned world had to offer

So Lil couldnt help but let herself be optimistic about the flow of time now.

The future doesnt need to start out big. After all, didnt Ed tell me that the farmers seed sprouted such a small will that one couldnt have expected results in this huge Empire?

I cant believe it, too, because actually, its also strange for me. Im a really pessimistic person, but when I allow myself to say things like this, I feel as happy as a child

Dont mention it. Through the years, we all just agreed that the Captains personality would always be gloomy, like dark clouds without any rays of light.

Its a shame we dont have glasses. In times like this, we really could use a drink.

Alain nodded and pretended to make a toast.

To the Bell Rock and everyone who would gladly toast to that filthy character of yours.

The three laughed at the same time.

Stories about the past flowed naturally. Alain, eventually, spoke with a red face even though he hadnt had a single drop of alcohol and Jerichos stories, on the other hand, were so exaggerated that the night wasnt long enough to hear the end of it

Lil forcefully woke up from her deep slumber. It was because Alain grabbed her arm and shook it.

Its dangerous here now that the day has come. You never know when the smugglers will break into an empty cabin. If the doctor is in good health, we should start moving and since our lives are on the line, it truly would be better for us to get going.

Being blinded, Lil turned away from the sunlight pouring in from the shutters that Alain had opened. She stood up unsteadily, rubbing her tired eyes.

Where do you think we should go? Reinforcements are on the way. It normally wont take a day, but its a forest, so the paths may diverge This is the cabin closest to the beach, right?

Alain nodded his head.

Thats right. In that case, its better to stay here than to wander outside.

Jericho asked, wiping his nose.

Captain. Do you have any cash?

Are you kidding me? Didnt I tell you I fell off a cliff?

I asked just in case No matter who we meet, we cant negotiate.

Okay, then we should quickly come up with another idea It would be best if someone stood watch on the roof, though.

Alain nodded and pointed at the ceiling before raising his index and middle finger.

If you go up there, you will see two paths, one on the left and one on the right.

Lil, who remembered the paths from when she first looked around the cabin, got up from her seat.

Alain, stay to see if Ed wakes up and Jericho watch the sea from the door. Ill guard the two paths from the roof.

Lil accepted Alains gun.

But Captain, how did you guys get wounded like this?

Are you now curious about that?

Well, seeing the doctors condition, it will be best to minimise our injuries. Thats why I cant help but be curious about how this all happened.

Well, we got hurt somehow.

Did you accidentally fall off the cliff?

Lil nodded half-heartedly and opened the front door.

The sea was visible between the sparse tree trunks, while the wind was calm and the sky was clear without a cloud. Despite the tranquil scenery, her mind was growing impatient. Lil quickly climbed the wall to get onto the roof, feeling the curves of the intertwined logs under her sole. After reaching the top, she lay down in a stable position for sniping.

The wind ruffled her hair. And although her forehead itched, she didnt dare to move. She couldnt afford the luxury as she had to stay focused

Ed opened his eyes with a terrible thirst. The first thing he noticed was the sparse darkness, followed by the burning fireplace.

Im sorry, Doctor. Its quite dark, isnt it? I had to close the shutters.

Who

Dont be surprised. Its me, Alain.

Alerted by those words, Ed tried to turn his head. Of course, it didnt rotate the way he wanted.

Where is Liloa? And how is Alain here?

He forced his dry vocal cords to move.

Lil You wouldnt have killed Lil

Just drink some water.

Alain, who supported Eds head, poured water into his mouth.

You still have a fever. I guess I should hurry and find those herbs

Ed hoped that Alain would start explaining their current situation on his own without him having to say anything more. Luckily, Alain saw Eds twitching lips and gave him the answer he wanted.

The Captain is on the roof. Well never know when the smugglers will strike. This forest No, you would know better

..?

Ed asked with his eyes.

As the Admiral.

His throat fell dry again.

Why did Liloa think it was a good idea to leave me here alone with Alain?

Ed tried to raise his upper body even if it was too much for him. He thought that would be better for his sanity. Unfortunately, the damp log hit his back again.

Alain spoke, supporting Ed.

Dont worry. Me and Jericho are only repaying our debt.

After you sent us off like that I have never felt at ease. The only thing I thought about was to rescue our Captain and ensure he No, she was safe.

Ed asked, trying to catch his breath.

Was the Bell Rock shipwrecked? Why are you here?

Our mission was to retrieve the body if the Captain had died. At the Devito Harbour, you said it yourself, that the people who attacked the Captain were people even you dont know.

You and Jericho?

Thats right. There were more than a hundred men who wanted to follow, but how could we possibly risk ourselves getting mobbed and killed in droves? So, in the end, only me and Jericho went back.

Alain was about to wipe Eds face with a clean cloth. Ed, however, instinctively avoided the touch and was handed the cloth instead.

This

This is what I got from going back and forth to other cabins a few times. Weve only seen smugglers once or twice, and they dont move goods as systematically as we thought. Even though its imperial land, I never expected the system to be more shabby than Amiaeng.

Ed struggled to wipe his face and neck without answering, it didnt go as easily as he hoped. He then lifted the cloth that covered him like a blanket, the condition of his legs was no different.

As he looked around, he saw dusty furniture and a floor covered with dried grass. The shutters were closed, but his eyes were already accustomed to the darkness enough for him to know that he was in an environment in which it wouldnt be strange if he were to become infected and die soon.

Damn it.

So, how did you end up like this?

Didnt the Captain explain?

I only heard you got hurt because of an accident.

I guess she skipped that part. Well, she wouldnt have been able to say that her brother caused all of this.

Ed answered vaguely.

Its not much different from what happened on the Bell Rock.

Speaking of on the Bell Rock, Admiral, why on earth were you on our ship?

I can only tell you that it was completely unrelated to the Navy. Will you believe me this time?*

Honestly, its hard to believe, but I trust the Captain.

Chapter 302

Ed looked at Alains face, which was thinner than when he had just escaped from prison.

To think they came back to the Empire solely because of their concern for Liloa Where else can one find more sincerity than this? Liloa may act stoic on the outside, but even I, who hasnt been naturally attentive to emotions, can easily guess that these guys sincerity moved her. She mustve been overcome with intense emotion. After all, the bond she shares with these people is probably thicker than the one she shares with her family.

Ed gently lowered his head.

Everyone does.

And I also believe in goodness.

Goodness?

We live in a crazy world, dont we? Still, Anunchio, that old man, preached about goodness as if it were religion. He said that goodness would save us. Isnt that ridiculous? Hes a complete idealist.

Ed remembered Anunchios cheerful face.

And you didnt believe in that?

Im not as good-natured as Captain Anunchio, but I knew better than anyone else that we couldnt win a war against the Empire. So, I wanted to believe in the vain hope of that so-called goodness. Then one day, I met a captain who told me that there was no need to rule with the whip. Hearing her say that, I couldnt help but be fascinated.

I see.

I was possessed, but at the same time, I thought I was crazy for being swayed. I mean, what kind of logic does one need to have to come up with something like that? But she did it in the end. The Bell Rock is the living proof of that goodness. Anunchio believed that Lil Schweiz's way would save us. That's why he brought in the Captain despite the opposition of the other captains. If there is a genius who is unique in the world, it's Lil Schweiz.

Ed couldn't help but laugh at Alain's last sentence. But since his vocal cords were dry, it came out more like a sneeze. In the end, he was only able to respond after drinking another glass of water.

I agree with you on that.

Alain smiled broadly and looked up at the ceiling.

That's how you and I ended up here. I'm very proud of our Captain, who was able to bewitch someone as terrible as the Admiral.

I thought I was the only one who was aware of that fact.

Don't make me laugh, Doctor. There's no one among the Bell Rock's sailors who didn't notice.

Is that so?

Bursting into laughter, Alain nodded his head.

It's true.

Well, that's rather embarrassing.

Suddenly, Alain handed him stew in a rough bowl.

Judging from the addition of meat, it looks like they have been hunting.

Eat some if you can. The Captain caught a rabbit last night. I knew she was an excellent shot, but I didn't know she was a good hunter as well.

Even though Ed had no intention of refusing, he also didn't want to ask Alain to feed him, so he grabbed the spoon himself. It took him all the effort he could muster, but he refused to drop the spoon. Fortunately, Alain was kind and patient enough to hold the bowl for him. Goosebumps rose all over Ed's body, but no matter what, he shouldn't pass out again now. Ignoring the strange sense of solidarity, Ed settled for his meal without saying anything.

Lil lay motionless on her stomach. As she was concentrating on her vision, a curly-haired face suddenly popped out.

Captain! Are you still alive up there?

Lowering her gun, she gestured for Jericho to move next to her.

Quiet.

I thought you were dead because it was so quiet up here. You know, I lived worrying about whether you were dead or alive every day, and now it seems that I just can't bring myself to stop.

What? Worried?

When Jericho nodded his head, Lil sighed and asked back with a look of disdain.

You? Worried? For me?

Why not?

Youve grown a lot, Jericho.

Captain.

Lil gestured once again as he kept stalling.

What? Get out of the way quickly.

Still, Jericho remained steadfast, annoying her more than ever before.

You must survive. I was so worried, so you must. All right?

Im not going to die, so dont worry about me. Worry about yourself instead. When were out of here, Ill put you on a merchant ship heading south, so just pretend to be a sailor and disappear in Amiaeng.

What do you mean you wont die? You said it yourself. You came back from death, but youre completely okay now?

I thought we had gone through this yesterday.

But Grandpa didnt ask about this yesterday.

Do I look like Im dying?

No.

Then whats the problem?

Im trying to be sure because thats what they entrusted me with.

What do you mean they?

Do you think there were just one or two people who asked to get off the Bell Rock and come back here? Ever since Grandpa told everyone at the Devito Harbour about the news of the Captains kidnapping, everyone was of one mind.

Hah. Are you trying to make me cry?

Lil clenched her trembling neck. She continued, hoping her voice was still okay.

Go now.

Do you have any idea how difficult it was for just me and Grandpa to come here? We almost came in droves.

Okay. I appreciate that. Really.

Jericho grumpily pouted and grumbled.

Is that it?

What else do you expect me to say?

Even if you died and came back to life, youre still the same, huh?

Get that face out of my line of sight before I shoot you. And for the love of god, stop pouting!

Jericho, with his eyes open in a triangular shape, disappeared down just as he tucked in his lips. Lil shook her head in amazement and tried to focus again. But Jerichos inner grumbles could be heard all the way up to the rooftop.

In the end, Lil failed to concentrate, leading her to blurt out her words in a rapid fire.

Okay, okay, I got it! Thank you so, so much!

She could hear Jericho laughing happily from below. Just as she was about to tell him to be quiet, Alain opened the window and spoke.

Captain, the doctor has awakened.

Lil wanted to see him in person, but she didnt have the confidence to hide her feelings. And even if she could, they were in an especially complicated situation now too, so she wanted to remain as composed as possible. Moreover, as Alain said, they would never know when smugglers might strike. So instead of Lil coming down to see Ed, she ordered Jericho, who was still below the roof.

Jericho, you go. Ask him about any helpful medicinal herbs around here, then go and dig them up.

Aye, Captain!

Unsure of the number of hours that had already passed, Lil lay motionless. Even though the crown of her head occasionally grew hot, the shade of the leaves quickly cooled the back of her head again. The breeze made the heat negligible.

Jericho finished gathering the herbs a while ago. Unless something strongly unfortunate happens, Linhardt should reach us before sunset at the latest. Even considering the time it will take to mobilise the guards and organise a search party, it shouldnt take long for him to circle back from the cliff, enter the forest and reach the shore.

Lil, who was carefully identifying potential factors that could cause Linhardts delay in reaching them, belatedly noticed Alains presence on the roof.

Captain, Jericho and I take watch outside so that you can assess the doctors condition for yourself. Please take note of his face, it really took a turn for the worse.

Lil answered without taking her eye off the vizor.

I know hell live.

Is that all you can say about someone who came back from the dead?

He never died in the first place.

What are you talking about? His whole body felt like it was on fire last night. If it werent for the herbs gathered by Jericho, he wouldve been in big trouble.

Since when did you become so attached to Ed?

Since when? Havent I always been fond of him?

Thats bullshit.

Anyway, I may not be as good as the Captain, but I know how to handle a rifle, so hurry up and get in there. Jericho and I will each take care of a route, so don't worry.

We barely got off the ship, but immediately, neither Grandpa nor Jericho listens to what I say anymore. Why are there so many nags? It makes me feel like I'm out on the sea with ten navigators in tow.

However, Alain didn't heed her complaints and casually grabbed the gun barrel, leaving Lil without any choice but to hand it over obediently. Jericho then came up to the roof. As if she were switching places with him, she gave him space and climbed down the ladder of logs.

Standing under the shade and feeling the forest breeze for a while, she cooled off her sweat. Every time the sea breeze blew, the lush blades of grass rubbed against each other and created a calming harmony.

Lil glanced at the sea, it was peaceful with no sight of any incoming ships. It was a scene that meant that the smugglers hadn't landed yet and she regarded that fact as a pure stroke of luck. But as Lil turned around and entered the cabin, the back of her head felt cold for no reason

Chapter 303

Lil carefully adjusted the tone of her voice as to not reveal her anxiety.

How long do you think it will take until Linhardt comes?

Ed was sitting on the floor leaning against the wall below the window. It was dangerous to leave the shutters open, but a patient like Ed needed to breathe clean air.

Ed muttered, squinting his closed eyes.

I was wondering when you would come in. It seems like three hours have already passed

Sunlight mixed with dust shimmered on the lashes of his sunken and quivering eyes. His upright sitting posture was undisturbed, but his neck and collarbones, glistening with cold sweat, revealed that he had been suffering from a high fever the whole time.

Lil moistened a towel with lukewarm water again and approached Ed. As she moved close to him, his hot body temperature clung to her skin.

How long do you think it will take for Linhardt to reach us?

If we're only talking about time, then he should've reached us by now.

Then what's keeping him? What's going on?

He could be waiting for the Imperial Army.

No way. Linhardt's face at that time looked like he would come running down straight away.

His face?

Before we fell. Linhardt was holding on to me.

I see.

Lil opened his shirt and wiped his neck.

He seemed very desperate. Like he thought you would never survive.

He always worries about unnecessary things.

I've seen quite a few relatives whose bond is pretty close, but I never thought you had a cousin like that.

Our bond isn't that close.

I believe Linhardt begs to differ.

It came as a surprise to Lil as well.

I never realised that Ed has a family that openly expresses their affection. To me it always seemed like he had been living alone in this world. That was actually the reason why I so desperately wanted to express my affection for him, to tell him he wasn't alone anymore. But now that I think about it, it makes sense that the person who is so natural at giving affection also receives it. In that sense, it also explains why whatever I was doing felt kinda awkward and maybe a bit forced.

After my grandfather died, Linhardt had tried to act as my older brother. But I found it annoying and useless.

Then there must be a reason for the delay in finding us.

Tap. Tap.

Alarmed, Lil and Ed simultaneously turned their heads towards the ceiling. It sounded like either Alain or Jericho stomped their feet on the roof as a signal. Lil grabbed Ed's shoulder and pressed him down as he was about to move his body. She then calmly drew her gun and placed her back next to the window.

She asked in a voice loud enough to reach the rooftop.

From where?

Alain responded in a very wary tone.

The sea. A ship is coming.

Damn it.

I think it's a smuggling ship as they sailed covertly along the cliff. I just saw it, but I can't see it now. It's difficult to get a broad view because of the trees.

Lil looked down at Ed, who was leaning on the window sill.

Is there any possibility that Linhardt will come via the waterway?

There is, but he wouldn't have chosen a route along the coastline. That's the route only smugglers use to reach this place.

If you know, why did you let the smuggling happen right in front of your territory? Isn't this a merchant ship which was supposed to land in Roahn?

Ed looked up at her as if asking why there was a need to be scolded by her in this very situation, but Lil's threatening gaze alone conveyed her meaning.

What?

The Navy isn't obligated to protect merchant ships or taxes. Plus, it's not my territory, and I don't want to join forces with the Imperial Army and become entangled in matters that involve various powers.

Various powers?

Let's just say it's more complicated than it looks.

In any case, criticising Ed here won't make the smugglers disappear right away.

Lil lowered her body with a sigh. She spoke while putting one of Ed's arms around her shoulders.

Get up now. We shouldn't stay here any longer.

I don't know the detailed geography of this forest

Alain and Jericho have been hanging out here for a few weeks, so I'm sure they know where to take refuge. Let's go.

At that moment, Jericho suddenly jumped down in front of the window and spoke rapidly.

We have to hurry. I noticed the incoming ship late because I was only looking at the path towards the forest

Alain came in through the entrance and tried to support Ed's remaining arm. Lil took turns looking between Alain and Jericho, who was still standing beyond the window, before giving orders.

Jericho will be best suited to help Ed. He's the tallest among the three of us.

I can walk alone

Lil quickly punched Ed's side after he tried to talk nonsense again.

Jericho will support Ed. Alain, take the front, and I will be guarding the back. Grandpa will decide where to go and guide us.

Where to?

To the place where we were supposed to move to last night. Is there a problem with that now?

I can't guarantee it. Still, the sea over there is about to turn into a smugglers dock, so anywhere will be better than here.

If today is the scheduled arrival date of that ship, is there a possibility that the rest of the smugglers waiting on land will also move?

Ed, who was being passed from Alain to Jericho, answered.

Of course there is.

Then that would be more chaotic. Linhardt might be late because of their movement.

Maybe.

Lil swallowed her curses and gestured to Alain, who went out first through the wide-open front door. Lil quickly poured water into the fireplace, rummaged through the ashes, and followed. With their backs against the particularly loud sound of the waves, they went beyond the cabin and into the depths of the forest.

The fog that hung between the towering trees was humid, while the ground was still damp with traces of last night's rain.

Lil sighed as she gave up on concealing their footprints in the mud and leaves.

It's fortunate that Ed is able to walk. Although his thigh injury is just as critical as his high fever, moving is our best bet for now.

Lil asked without being sure who she was talking to.

Are you sure this is the way?

Jericho, who was holding Ed's arm tightly, glanced back.

We're sure. Where do you think we got the clean water and cloth?

What kind of place is it?

It's a cabin used by smugglers, but they left a few days ago. They're not going to Roahn but to a different village somewhere along the Great Trade Route.

And you're positive they plan to be away for some time?

It seemed like they were going to sell something, so they probably won't be in the cabin for a few weeks.

It looks like smuggled goods are being distributed along the Great Trade Route. I guess it's a common phenomenon.

After noticing that her thoughts were drifting off that far, Lil cut them off as they weren't helpful for their survival at all.

Now that we're out of the cabin, I need to think of a way to contact Linhardt and tell him where to meet!

Hold on.

As soon as Lil said that, their steps stopped. No one questioned it. Alain, holding a gun, slowly came close behind a tree. Jericho also pulled out a dagger, and Lil gripped her gun with both hands.

Ed, who was rummaging through his empty waistband, glanced at Lil.

I don't. You want me to die?

Feeling sorry, Lil quickly handed him a gun.

Even though the wind cut through the branches like a rake, the fog didn't move in the slightest.

Tap, tap.

Wind-blown fruit fell on the wet ground. Amidst the humid sounds of birds and insects, Lil listened for any human voices.

One, two, three

Ed whispered.

At least four at eleven o'clock. No, make that five or six.

Lil nodded dryly and looked around.

This place has openings on all sides. Forests don't have the same density as jungles, so our location is clearly visible from unlucky angles. We have no cover, and our fresh footprints remain vivid

Are there any caves or tree stumps around?

Alain shook his head.

This land is flat.

How long will it take us to get to the cabin?

Even if we go quickly, it will take us more than 10 minutes.

Jericho pressed her shoulder and whispered.

They're coming this way

Voices could be heard beyond the fog.

There's no other way.

Without the need for an order, they each hid behind a tree.

Lil suppressed her laboured breathing. She craned her head, resting her shoulder against the rough wooden beam, desperately hoping that the approaching group belonged to Linhardt

Chapter 304

Unfortunately, the voices that were gradually getting closer didn't belong to the imperial army or Roahn's army.

Alain spoke from next to Lil.

Captain, smugglers

Shh

If battle is unavoidable, a pre-emptive strike will be advantageous, but we can't engage prematurely when we're injured from the start. Instead, it's only right to wait for them to pass quietly like this.

Lil just turned her eyes and looked at Ed. His face looked hazy due to the fog that had settled between them. As the chilly air crawled onto the back of her neck and her bad feeling worsened.

The crude singing sound of rough voices got closer and closer. The song was unfamiliar to Lil, but she could tell it was a Western-style folk song.

At some point, the song ended and their voices were now clear enough to make out what they were saying.

Why is the weather so bad

Which bastard chose today

Soon enough, the sound of footsteps was right around the corner.

If they're trying to pass this way, then they must be heading to the coast. Had we delayed our departure a little longer, we would've been trapped in that cabin and run into them.

Unsure whether it was cold sweat or fog, but something wet formed on Lils forehead.

Today was annoying. Some imperial soldiers have been wandering around the entry of the forest since yesterday and to make matters worse, people Ive never seen before are suddenly patrolling as well. Thanks to them, we had to circle back for half an hour, causing a delay. Damn it! Just our luck

A different yet equally grumpy voice came through the woods between them.

Did they know that today is the day the ship comes in?

No clue. Still, we arent as late as those guys from Rose* dont tell me they got caught on patrol?

Bullshit. In all these years, those imperial bastards didnt know, so why come for us now?

Thats true

Someone spat phlegm loudly.

The six pairs of feet passed in front of the tree that concealed Lil one after another. The last slanted shadow moved before her eyes and gradually disappeared. Before long, one of them started singing again.

Lil crouched and held her breath until the singing could no longer be heard.

As Alain slowly got up and took the lead again, Jericho helped Ed and followed. The group started walking once more without any of them opening their mouths.

Lil eventually clung to Eds back and commented softly.

It looks like Linhardt and his men have already entered the forest

But it will still be hard to meet them without a proper meeting spot.

Once the smuggling ship docks, the area will become busy, so as long as the Imperial Army is patrolling near the entrance, why dont we just go straight out of the forest?

Its too far.

Jericho, whose back was towards Lil as he supported Ed, turned his head slightly to nod at her.

It will take about half a day to reach the end of the forest at this pace of ours.

Lil didnt say it with much conviction in the first place, but half a day was indeed too long.

In that case, we just need to hurry and hide. It looks like there will be more people gathering than expected. Did you hear that the rest of their members are running late?

Alain muttered from the front.

Shit, nothing is working out

Lil racked her brain for a breakthrough.

*All I can see are trees and fog even if there was a large rock we probably couldnt even find it
Reaching a spot where we can hide well, at the very least, increases our chances of survival, but the terrain in this flat forest is the worst*

Lil looked around the trees as she let her imagination run wild.

It might be safer if we were to climb a tree!

Suddenly, Lil made eye contact with a shadow on a tree. Watching more intently convinced her that she was staring at some human looking eyes.

The figure sitting on a thick branch among the dense leaves is clearly a person

Lil reflexively lowered her eyes. Her opponents hand seemed to be aiming at something.

In the sunlight barely shining through the fog, the water droplets on familiar metal shone dully. Her own gun was currently pointing toward the ground as she had mindlessly lowered her arms when she looked overhead

In a reflex, she threw her whole body forward and shouted.

Get down!

She pushed Ed and Jericho, before frantically covering her head. Alain, who was in front of them, also dove out of the way in a panic.

Bang!

Pebbles and leaves bounced off the ground where she had just stepped on.

Bang!

A flock of birds, startled by the noise, flew up.

Lil quickly stretched out her arms and tried to press the backs of Jericho and Eds heads. But Ed, who caught her arm, rolled on top of her.

Lil cried out as she was pulled into his embrace.

On the tree! A sentry!

Protecting her head, Ed hurriedly looked down at her.

Are you all right

Move!

Lil pushed Ed away. When they rolled half a turn, Lil was finally able to aim at the tree. But just as she was about to pull the trigger

Buuuuu!

The sentrys horn vibrated through the trees like an echo.

It was a low, booming sound that seemed to resonate with the forest air. The sentry, who noticed Lils muzzle, quickly descended the tree as if he were a monkey. Feet, that already knew the next stable point, stepped on the pillars and branches with precision, making their way further and further down.

Anticipating his next step on intuition, Lil aimed and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

Aaaahhh!

The sentry's body dropped straight down from the tree. Blood burst from the shins that made contact with the ground first. As the man shouted and rolled over fallen leaves, Lil stood up and rushed towards him.

Buuuuu!

Another longhorn sounded from behind. It rang two or three more times, so Lil wasted no time in issuing orders in the way she was accustomed to.

Damn it! Stay on guard! There are more sentries!

The man, who had been lying face down and crawling on his elbows, looked back at Lil with horrified eyes. Although he had run out of bullets a long time ago, he raised his empty gun towards her. Lil, on the other hand, mercilessly rushed forward and kicked the barrel of his gun without slowing down. She then grabbed and turned his helpless body against the direction where his gun flew.

Who are you?

Aaaah! Argh!

Lil gripped his chin as he struggled, his trembling jaw was covered in sweat and dirt.

Why did you open fire?

With leaves and mud all over his face, the man shouted, his eyes tightly closed.

Oh, I didn't see anything! I'll pretend I don't know!

Fine, keep your eyes closed then. Just tell me why you attacked us.

Really, I didn't see anything

With her free hand, Lil slapped his cheek in order to break him out of his panic.

Come to your senses. I don't have time for this, so just answer me and go. If I don't know your purpose, then you're leaving me with no choice but to kill you. It won't be so rewarding to keep your eyes closed once you're dead.

I saw you hide from the D-de-deer guys* earlier, so I thought you were outsiders.

Deer guys?

La they're from Laziliere

Deer? Laziliere? No way, they're working for Count Laziliere?

That's right! Yes! Heuk heuk so pl-please

Lil let go of the man's chin. The moment she did, he quickly turned around and crawled on the ground, choking back his tears, until the sound of leaves rustling loudly faded away. Lil wondered whether or not to tie him up, but in the end, she thought it would be better if he ran away and lost his sense of direction out of fear, so she left him alone. She did, however, take the horn just in case before returning to the group, giving them no space to argue.

Ed stood alone as she gestured at Jericho.

We should hurry. Our cover has already been blown.

Ed stopped Jerichos arm from trying to support him and nonchalantly walked on his own two feet.

I dont think you have the leisure to nag anymore.

That was what he said, but his steps were limp and his breathing unstable. However, Lil couldnt tell him not to overdo it, especially when they were in a situation where they didnt know who could come after them at any given moment. Reading Lils countenance, Alain moved first, followed by an almost running Jericho. Lil then trod forward, leading the way for Ed, who insisted he would walk alone

Chapter 305

The fog grew even more gloomy with trees towering at intervals within it. No matter where they went, the scenery remained the same. The environment made it even difficult for the group to determine the position of the sun. So whereas Alain took out his compass, Jericho, who had the better eyesight, walked along and scanned the trees to see if there were other sentries.

Meanwhile, Lil couldnt keep her suspicions to herself and asked Ed.

Why on earth are they so strict with outsiders? Theres no need to kill us when they dont even know who we are.

The greater the secret, the greater the fear.

Just from that answer, Lil already realised theyd dipped themselves into a far bigger mess than she first thought.

Since the horn was blown some time ago, those guys wouldve sent a tracking group by now. Its only a matter of time before were discovered. Negotiation or appeasement wont work on those who immediately open fire at the ones they deem to be outsiders. And because theyre backed by a noble like Count Lazilire, they wont hesitate to strike. Its only right that we give up on hiding in that cabin as we would be completely surrounded if caught

Lil imagined all sorts of situations in preparation for a battle, but she couldnt think of any viable solutions other than running toward the eastern end of the forest.

Damn it! Arent we headed toward a narrow pass? Were bound to encounter the rest of them soon. Plus, I wonder how many people would get off that ship. Well have no way through if they attack us from all directions.

Ed suddenly stopped, prompting Lil to similarly pause after realising her partners actions. As she approached him to check if he was hurting anywhere, Ed looked at Lil, who had swept his tangled hair.

Leave me behind.

What?

I cant guarantee the survival of us four, but I can survive alone.

What bullshit

You may have realised it by now, but the people smuggling here are all backed up by nobles from the Empire. This smuggling route is exclusive to huge merchants.

So?

I can talk to them well, and they'll realise that they shouldn't kill me

As if it wasn't worth listening to, Lil immediately cut him off.

And if you fail?

Ed glanced down at her and answered.

That won't happen.

I can't allow it.

Lil moved again before adding.

If you can't walk anymore, call Jericho.

Ed continued while catching up with her stride.

I won't be able to walk like this for another half an hour

Even if we leave you behind, we probably only win an hour or so. If we run into an unavoidable battle, I'd rather have the four of us all fighting together.

I bet if you let me go, there won't be a fight.

And what on earth are you going to negotiate about?

Of course, Ed's points of negotiation are endless, and there are tons of commercial reasons that I know nothing about. I have no intention of letting him explain all these complex commercial linkages to me now either. But I can't willingly do as Ed says. How can I leave him behind? How can I afford to let go of the hand I didn't let go of even when we were falling from a cliff? No, it's not possible

After pondering for a moment, Lil came up with the only acceptable compromise.

Then I'll go with you.

No.

Why?

Ed answered Lil straight away as if he had expected it.

Because those two alone won't be able to prove their identity.

Lil unconsciously looked at Alain and Jericho.

Their appearance alone, shaped by living in hiding in this forest for weeks, could indeed lead to an attack rather than a proper interrogation.

Tell them something that only you and Linhardt know. So that when Linhardt interrogates them, they can give a proper answer.

What if they encounter the Imperial Army first

Would you agree if you were in my shoes? Don't force me to do something even you couldn't have done if the roles were reversed!

Ed clearly has all the answers ready, and I dont have enough time to find his blind spots I have nothing else to add as a reason for disallowing him to proceed with his proposal, other than the reason that my instincts tell me not to. Ed seems to have an easy way to survive, but Alain and Jericho are indeed in danger wherever they go simply because theyre in the Empires territory

For no reason, Lil walked faster and glared at him as he responded.

I thought you would be calmer than me.

Eds eyes were as sharp and confident as ever, so Lil knew he wasnt telling a flimsy lie.

She dropped her gaze at his outfit. Blood that had flowed from his already battered upper arm mixed with mist drops and sweat, staining and dampening his shirt. His pants were dark, so one couldnt scrutinise the blood stains, but Lil knew his condition had worsened because he needed to use his muscles to walk.

If something goes wrong, hell never be able to get out of here.

Lil replied as she turned away from him.

Even if I think about it calmly, I still cant allow it.

Why?

Because if you cant convince me, who is next to you, hearing you out, how are you going to convince them, who shoot at sight?

As Ed didnt have an answer right away, only the sound of stepping on mud-covered leaves rang between them. Lil felt uncomfortable walking with him behind her, so she deliberately slowed herself down.

Ed, who was now walking next to her, muttered in a whisper.

I didnt know you wouldnt trust me this much

Cant you tell just by looking back on how we got into this mess in the first place?

I never thought I would be degraded to this level. It feels like like youre treating me as if I were a child

Feeling almost more exhausted than the face that was actually white, Lil confronted her persistent opponent, seeing him pointing an uncertain finger towards himself.

If only you were a real child right now, then I couldve picked you up and carried you on my back, but I cant even do that, thats why youre even more troublesome.

Ed let out a helpless laugh. Alain and Jericho glanced at each other in front of them, but Lil remained steadfast. She swore she would never let go of him again, and she really intended to keep that promise.

Lil. Really

The decision is final. No one will be left behind.

The fog suddenly became colder, and nobody dared to open his mouth.

Shut up and get ready for battle.

With those words, Lil loaded her crossbow. The order was so harsh that Ed kept his mouth shut. Having to settle down quickly, Lil pointed at a fallen tree that had rotted at its base.

Go over there.

The four, with their backs to each other, moved cautiously as they kept their guards up in all directions.

We only have one cover, so well be in a bind if they were to surround us from the side or back. However, the chance of victory is good as long as theres no backup unit coming after them.

Lil muttered after hearing some footsteps.

Theyre coming

Ed nodded at her.

Seven of them

Swinging the crossbow on her back, Lil said as she planted her feet on the tree trunk next to her.

Ill deal with them from the top. Cover me

I take this.

Ed quickly took the horn that was hanging from her waist. Lil then climbed up the damp tree trunk and perched on one of the sturdy branches. Her visibility improved significantly, and she was now able to see the movements beneath the mist at her feet.

Theyre coming this exact way.

She hid herself among the lush leaves and lay down on a branch that was thicker than her body. Her easy-to-hide body size had always been her advantage as a sniper.

No matter what happens, the four of us will walk out of this forest in one piece. Ill just have to deal with at least three of these to greatly improve our chances of winning. One, two, three seven Seeing them walk with their guard up, they too seem to be aware of the fact that their opponents are close by.

Lil aimed at the guy furthest among the approaching men.

Surprise attacks are most effective when dealt with silently. Ill start from the tail of the pack.

Because their opponents were walking slowly and warily, they became an easy target. Lil pulled the trigger without delay. Her body was pushed along with the sound of the arrow being shot, so she braced her legs around the branch to withstand the recoil, leaving only the leaves hanging over her body to shake.

One down.

As soon as the guy at the end collapsed, the two men in front of him looked back at their fallen comrade. They were about to check on him, but Lils index finger reacted first. One of the two grabbed his now arrow-shot neck and let out a surprised scream. The others, realising they were within their opponents range, delayed their movements while looking overhead. Mere seconds go by when another scream ripped through the forest, a third arrow had struck the back of a guards head and the man toppled forward.

Damn it! A sniper!

Chapter 306

Buuuuu!

The guy in the lead blew his horn.

Simultaneously, someone from Lils side also made a similar sound, as though to overrule it. It came from right under her tree and the loud echo repeated a beat she had never heard before.

You bastards! Why are you just standing there?! Up in the tree at ten oclock!

At their leaders warning, four guns were drawn towards Lil without delay. As a sniper, crossbows were useless once discovered, so Lil drew her rifle, shrinking her body in order to dodge the bullets.

Splinters of wood shattered sharply upon impact.

Damn it! Cover the Captain!

Two more people collapsed when Lils side opened fire as well, leaving the remaining two to run and hide behind a nearby tree.

Lil aimed her rifle again.

It will be for the best if we can end it here. But those who disappeared seem like they wont go for an offensive strike anytime soon I can only hear the horns blowing

Lil had a hunch.

Support is not far away. Both sides are waiting for backup. Our victory or defeat depends on whether Linhardt, who recognises Eds call, arrives first, or whether our opponents reinforcements get here before that.

Lil loaded her crossbow to increase the chances of survival for their party.

At that time, figures began to move towards them. Lil stopped manipulating her weapon and stared at them blankly, from the corner of her eyes she also saw Ed approaching their opponents with a dagger.

Looking at her feet, Alain and Jericho couldnt bear to follow him and looked up at her as they fidgeted.

Lil raised her palm in gesture before aiming her crossbow in order to cover him.

Ed continued to close the distance as if he were a phantom and disappeared behind a tree. It wouldve been impossible for Lil, who was up in the tree, to hear footsteps, so she couldnt gauge any sound from the other party. Shortly after, the shadows that had been moving steadily froze before falling one for one. This all happened without a single gunshot being fired. Eds shadow then crouched over them and reached for their guns and sheath.

Standing restless at the base of the tree, Alain was in awe.

Is Isnt that crazy? Does that even make sense?

Since it wasnt intended for anyone to hear, no one answered.

Ed isnt coming back, hes probably trying to find an advantageous spot over there.

After finishing her reload, Lil lay down on her belly against the branch again.

Their backup should be coming soon. So stay alert.

The hooves of several horses pounded the earth not long after that and the tree branch Lil was lying on shook dully.

Alain muttered below.

I mean, what now? We could get unlucky

Lil received those words alone.

Its not that bad

Ten shots are more than enough. Knowing that theyre on horses, its better to attack from the front. Once a horse is scared or excited, their formation will be disorganised.

Lil pulled the trigger in quick succession as soon as her opponents were in range. The startled horses raised their front hooves and neighed, causing the three horsemen in the lead to tumble down all at the same time.

The horses, whose saddles had become lighter, jumped out at will.

Sniper!

Multiple gun muzzles rose without delay.

In general, it was difficult to take down a sniper from a running horse, so all the attacks aimed at her were missed. When the rain of bullets ceased, Lil, crouching, immediately counterattacked with her rifle. Two more opponents fell. But that was it. After all, her accuracy would inevitably decrease the more her targets moved while riding.

The fast-approaching horsemen eventually jumped over the wooden pillar where Alain and Jericho were hiding. The two, with their backs now fully exposed, ran forward without hesitation and swung their swords.

Lil moved her head to the side to cover her allies backs, when a shout was heard from below.

Snipers position secured!..

Kill the sniper first!..

In seconds, several gun muzzles pointed directly at her forehead.

Shit!

Lil hunched her shoulders and ducked back up the tree.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The vibration of the tree branch resonated throughout her entire body.

Aim for the branch instead!..

Bullets penetrated the joint between the tree trunk and its branch.

Even if I try to shoot them back, it wont be easy because Alain and Jericho are entangled with them

The sound of swords clashing continued repeatedly and as they were evenly matched, none of her three allies seemed to have the capacity to cover her.

The entire tree shakes as if Im caught in an earthquake

Lil crawled, pulling her knees up from the rippling branches.

Shit. With just a few more shots

The branch, unable to withstand her weight, bent sharply. Fortunately for her, it wasnt completely separated from the trunk yet.

Lil glanced back at the branches joint.

A few more shots and it will completely tear off

Just in time, she spotted another branch of the opposite tree.

The angle isnt perfect, but I only need a buffer to hold my body.

She drew her gun and shot at the partly broken joint.

Bang!

Along with her gunshot, the old branch began to break. The vibration of the trees bent joint transmitted through her shins and palms.

Her vision slanted and she sank.

The giant sized branch tore completely and fell.

The gunfire instantly stopped and the voices below shouted.

Ugh! Get away!

Its falling on us!

In a panic, the horses neighed and loudly pounded their hooves on the ground.

Lil stretched her arms just as she was about to fall vertically along with the old branch. As soon as the branch of the opposite tree grazed her forearm, she gripped its damp wooden surface with great difficulty. But when her shoulder felt like it was going to detach from the gravitational force, she had to let go. As she fell, she hung her arms frantically on the other branches below her. This time her entire sternum heaved and ached.

She tapped her foot in the air but soon her arm slipped again.

Shit

Lils palms desperately tried to hold on to something. She carelessly grabbed at the foliage and broke several branches along the way. Nevertheless, she continued to fall

Looking down, she saw she had nothing more to support her body. Only the ground was getting closer every second. Lil, however, thought if she fell and rolled sideways a few times, it would be enough to cushion the impact.

Ill perhaps break an arm, but that wont be that big of a problem.

Lil twisted her body slightly, hoping to fall to the left

Liloa!

At first, Lil didn't recognize who it was because the voice came from someone riding horseback, but soon she saw Ed throwing away the sword he was holding. He then slammed down on the reins and stood with his feet in the stirrups. Since Lil was falling quickly, their movements alone brought the two closer together.

As Ed let go of the reins, he reached out toward her. No words were said, but his purpose was obvious. Lil thought he was crazy, but she also reached out to him unintentionally. Ed then threw his body sideways and intentionally jumped off his horse. As he was spinning in the air, he snatched Lil from her orbit.

Lil felt his arms wrapping around her head and the blood that had wafted from his upper arm covered her. Instinctively, she grabbed him by the waist. They rolled straight to the ground with no time to prepare for the suffocating feeling caused by the centrifugal force that pressed down on their bodies. It even felt like they were being squeezed like laundry. Their rotating bodies only came to a stop when they hit a wooden beam.

Ed, who was curled up while holding Lil, suppressed a groan and breathed out heavily.

Lil immediately tried to break free, pushing away the arms that were so tightly wrapped around her that it felt like they were about to break her. It was then that Ed rolled on his back with an exaggerated gesture and lay sprawled out towards the sky.

When Lil raised her upper body, it was lighter than she had expected.

Of course, pain is unavoidable. But whether Ed absorbed the impact or because of the direction I threw myself in the air, the pain is far less severe than I had anticipated..!

Lil instantly hid herself behind a wooden pillar and surveyed the situation around them.

One of our remaining opponents is coming this way.

The moment the guy climbed over the branch she had broken, Lil became as nervous as she could be. However, like water poured over a burning fire, the childish complaints from her side instantly relaxed her body.

Oh, I'm dying

Bewildered by Ed, who was still lying flat on his back, Lil slapped his forearm.

Does it even make sense for him to make such a fuss in this situation?

You can get shot! Why are you lying around and not taking cover?

Only then did Ed turn to face Lil. He frowned and let out a groan.

I think I'll die of pain before a bullet hits me. You look fine though, so I guess you can protect me

Chapter 307

Lil asked back, a hint of relief in her voice after having examined his limbs, which were at the very least still moving.

Was it that painful? How high was I?

Ed crumpled his face and fumed, it was an expression Lil had never seen before.

Are you kidding me?! If you had fallen there as it was, you couldve considered yourself lucky if you only fractured your entire body

Was it that high?

Ed merely blinked, perhaps finding it pointless to keep bickering about that now. Lil naturally followed his gaze and saw the white scar on the tree that had just lost its branch.

It looks approximately three stories high

As Lil looked back at Ed, she had a clear look of pity on her face. It was now for Ed the first time to see her that way.

So, whos the child now?

Lil was speechless.

No matter how much I tried to slow myself down by grabbing onto the few branches next to me, the height was still considerably higher than I thought

Ed, leaning on one arm, laughed. But when pain hit him somewhere in his body, his laughter turned into dry coughs and groans.

Lil examined his body again.

Despite being covered in a dark red liquid, probably a mixture of both mud and blood, he appears unharmed. He doesnt look like someone who just snatched someone midair and bore the impact

Lil clung to the base of the tree when her mood turned cautious again.

From the looks of it, Alain and Jericho have already sorted out the situation. All theres left is that one guy coming towards us, but I didnt see where he went..!

Feeling a shiver going down her spine, Lil quickly checked behind her, but there was no one there either. At that moment, the sound of a horn blowing sporadically from a corner rang out and resonated throughout their surroundings.

He never intended to approach us, rather he went into hiding somewhere out of mine and Alains sight He wasnt a soldier in the first place, and with all his colleagues dead, a cry for help was his only choice.

The sound of the horn being blown with all its might was formidable. It was so loud that it could probably be heard throughout the entire forest. Fortunately, Jericho eventually found him behind a tree and took care of him.

As the echo remained for a long time, Lil pondered.

If another group of cavalry comes, we have no chance of winning. We ran out of bullets, Ed is stretched out, complaining he cant move at all and, Alain and Jericho engaged in hand-to-hand combat, so they must be exhausted by now.

When worry and anxiety made Lils mind blurry, she shook her head and forced herself to concentrate. She thought about the simplest and quickest exit strategy.

We have the weapons of the fallen men rolling around on the ground, and three or four horses are wandering around, grazing the grass. We have to give up on fighting and get as far away from this place as possible. And this time, we need to run all the way to the East.

Lil supported Eds torso as he sat up. Her mind was impatient and anxious enough that she almost yanked his arm, but seeing his unbandaged arm in its terrible shape, Lil deemed it too delicate to be pulled recklessly. She was then handed the bandage, which Ed had removed, and wrapped it tightly around his shoulder and left upper arm. His face contorted to the fullest as he suppressed his groans every time the fabric was pulled tight.

Get up slowly.

Supporting his back, Lil stood awkwardly next to Ed, who lifted his body. Alain and Jericho came running and appeared clearly out of breath just as she had predicted.

Lil simply ordered.

Lets grab one each so that we can get out of here quickly.

Jericho went next to Ed and supported him. Unlike before, Ed now leaned almost his entire body on Jericho. In the meantime, Lil quickly brought the reins of two horses.

Can you climb? Jericho, help him out.

There was no time to waste, so Lil picked up a few more rifles from the fallen men around them and after seeing Ed successfully climb a horse, she climbed into the saddle of another one herself. Because she was at the rear, she could only see Eds back, but when she scrutinised him further, it seemed like he couldnt move his left arm at all.

If its a fracture, it will become difficult for him to withstand riding at high speeds. Maybe we should ride together

However, Jericho and Ed already took off, following Alain, who had moved first. Lil twisted the reins and squinted at Ed.

Although he seems stable when holding the reins with one arm, I cant help but feel nervous.

Soon they were running through the forest at full speed. Perhaps because it was an unused and narrow road, tree branches came rushing in and clawed at their bodies.

Eventually, Lils ears, accustomed to the sound of the hooves of four horses, heard other noises that caused the hairs on her spine to instinctively stand on end. Without the need to look back, she sensed countless hooves roaring closer. At first, it came from their front, but then similar sounds from their rear followed suit. Lil hastily kicked the stirrup. Her horse caught up with her companions as she aimed to take the lead.

If were going to be surrounded from all sides, I have no choice but to attack head-on.

Ill break through!

Lil held the rifle she carried on her back. Fortunately, the fog was clearing, and their visibility improved. Sunlight suddenly penetrated the dreary and damp land.

I have five or six bullets to fire, and our opponents are also rushing towards us. I can handle them easily as long as I spot the targets first.

Lil was confident that she wouldn't miss any of her long-distance shots.

As clear shadows emerged through the fog, Lil looped the reins around her wrist and grabbed the barrel of her gun. The moment she placed her index finger on the trigger, the sound of a flute, thinner than that of a horn, rang sharply.

There was a certain beat and flow to it.

It's just like Ed's rhythm!

Stopping herself from firing, Lil lowered her gun and muttered.

Linhardt?..

She couldn't think of anyone else who could exchange secret signals with Ed. She was about to turn her head around, when the sound of the same beat passed by her ears already. Lil had no clue how Ed was able to raise the horn and blow it, but as if in response, someone shouted from somewhere not too far away.

The sound of hooves ahead of them stopped in perfect harmony.

Anticipating salvation, Lil's heart began to beat like crazy and she rode her horse forward without taking a moment to catch her breath. The fog, which was now as dense as wet cotton, quickly cleared away. When she broke through the front line, she found horses with empty saddles lined up in a relatively large clearing.

An army took aim at them in order to fire a volley*. Linhardt, who was in the very centre, shouted over his rifle.

Get down!

Lil immediately leaned over her saddle.

Fire!

Bullets passed sharply over the top of her head. When Lil sensed the coal smoke exploding ahead, screams rose from behind them.

Load!

When the first line went into reload, the musketeers in the second row came out to the front of the line.

Fire!

Lil passed through the troops amidst gunfire. Only when she reached the rear did she pull on the reins and unconsciously look back the way she had come from. The party behind them were frantically running and stirring up the forest due to the imperial army's steady attacks. The more bullets were fired, the more their enemy's horses ran wild, and the more riders fell off of them. Amid the ear-splitting gunfire and smoke, Ed, Alain, and Jericho arrived next to her.

Lil shouted as she hastily looked around her.

Levi!

The path to this part of the empire's territory must've been a rough road, but Lil didn't doubt that Levi would come.

Ed was mortally wounded, and Levi is the only competent doctor around, so she wouldve gone along, no matter who was against it.

Once the gunfire noise ceased for reload, she shouted again.

Levi!

A familiar face appeared in Lils constantly changing field of view.

Shail?

Im relieved youre safe, my lady.

Shail, who was approaching Lil, stirred his horse out of the way as if to clear a path. Right behind him was Levi, who moved as soon as she spotted Lil.

She then asked, scanning Lil thoroughly.

Where are you hurt?

Lil shook her head quickly.

Edgar, not me

Huh? Doctor?!

Oh! Hes going to fall!

At the sound of Alain and Jerichos voices, Levi reflexively looked behind Lil. Her face hardened in shock and she ran straight to Ed. Without hesitation, Lil jumped to the ground and followed Levi, whereas Shail, who was still on his horse, supported Eds body, which had begun to fall sideways. Jericho stood quickly next to the horse and helped take Eds foot out of the stirrups.

Lil gritted her teeth to suppress a scream.

Ed, now exposed under a bright and clear sky, was in an extremely cruel shape. His body, closely resembling that of a corpse, was soaked in dark red as if he had been drowned in blood. Not only the newly wrapped bandages, but his whole shirt had turned black. His thigh wound had been bleeding so severely that even the horse he was riding was now covered in blood

Chapter 308

Now laying down, Levi tapped Eds shoulder.

Edgar. Edgar!

Seeing no reaction, Levi continued by checking his pupils and raising his uninjured knee. When she noticed the blood stains on the horse, she repositioned him.

Hes bleeding excessively and is barely conscious. Everyone, get out of the way. Shail, get a blanket.

Whereas Alain and Jericho backed away from Ed, Lil didnt. Meanwhile, Levi was about to touch his bandages when her hand paused.

Whats going on? Whats wrong with his shoulder?

Shoulder?

Instead of answering, Levi quickly cut open Eds bandages and shirt. The area between his upper arm and shoulder was hollow as if the bone had been crushed. Levi muttered as she poured some disinfectant over it in order to stop the bleeding.

How did he endure horseback riding? Especially at that speed

Levi palpated a few more points and tilted her head.

His shoulder blade doesnt seem to be in good condition either. Do you know how he got this fracture?

It was the first time Lil heard such a cold voice coming from Levi. But thanks to that, she managed to calm herself down and catch her breath. Lil then bit her lip, recalling the time she fell from the tree.

I fell from a high place, but Ed caught me midair and we rolled on the ground with his arms wrapped around me.

How about you, are you hurt anywhere?

Im fine.

How is he?..

As soon as the battle was over Linhardt came and knelt beside Levi. After checking Eds condition, he asked with a worried face.

Levi answered.

He was bleeding from earlier injuries to begin with. With the addition of this new fracture, hes certainly in rough shape. He mustve sacrificed his already injured arm, not expecting it could lead to this and thinking that it would allow him to at least use one arm properly. The pain mustve been terrible Fortunately, all the major blood vessels were missed. We need to move him to a clean place first.

Levi finished stopping the bleeding from Eds leg and entrusted the stretcher to the surrounding soldiers. As she was about to follow the stretcher, her eyes fell on Alain and Jericho.

All patients follow me.

..?

Lil nodded her head at Alain, whose eyes were unsure.

Tearing her eyes away from Levis back, Lil could finally let out the breath she had long been suppressing and the chilly air swirled around her chest.

Maxwell, where is he?

Linhardt answered her a beat later.

Levi saved him, but he wont open his mouth.

Who is he though? I get the impression you know.

Lil unfastened her rifle from her holster and felt devastated when she said it out loud.

A royal guard from Obernyu.

Obernnyu? As in the Eastern Principality of Obernnyu?

But they have nothing to do with him, do they? Or did Edgar do something crazy again? He said he went to the South, but what has that got to do with the East

The connection was through me this time.

What?

Im from Obernnyu.

What?!

Linhardt unintentionally blurted out in disbelief before shutting his mouth.

Then the reason why youre both heading to Obernnyu

Lil just nodded and carried on, followed by Linhardt, who straightened up his posture as they tailed Levi. Even though Levi had always been a similar height as Linhardt, the latters larger build was big enough to cast a shadow over her head.

Lil looked over her shoulder at the scene being cleaned up.

There must be a reason why the Imperial Army was brought in, right?

Oh, we were late because I had to wait for those annoying guys. I apologise

It was a situation that Linhardt shouldnt be sorry for, so Lil looked up at him with much sincerity. Linhardt, however, was trying to make up for the situation by spewing nonsense at a rapid pace.

But it didnt look like he was dying, so thats a relief. Actually, judging by the way Edgar normally behaves, his condition is actually pretty good.

Why does Edgar act like he has ten bodies?

Hes been like that since he was ten years old. Im sure youve heard a lot about it by now, right? Levi even said it herself, that she was relieved. So its going to be okay.

If it came from Levi, then its indeed relieving.

Lil asked as she watched the imperial army tie up the prisoners who engaged them in a battle.

They arent your ordinary smugglers, are they?

The imperial nobles take detours through them, thats also the reason why were late. To be exact, we had to wait for imperial troops who werent involved.

So, theres rotting everywhere. Gualtiero was in a similar state. How is the Empire holding out like this?

Is His Majestys niece discussing the decline of the Empire?

It was a title she hadnt heard in years. Lil wrinkled the bridge of her nose and looked back at Linhardt.

Are you serious?

Obernnyu is the closest to the Imperial family among the principalities near the Great Lakes, after all.

Its not that close to me.

Didnt you represent Obernyu in the Pontenbach war?

It seems like Shail told him about my participation, perhaps their conversation flowed that way when they discussed the possible backgrounds behind the attack I dont usually talk to Linhardt alone, but now he appears to have a lot of questions regarding me.

What questions have you been holding back on until now?

Rather than holding back, lets just say Im asking now that I have the chance. It has been amazing to see how much Edgar has changed in such a short period of time because of you. So it would be a lie if I didnt even wonder what kind of person you are.

Its been a long time since I entered the war as a carabiner, and I was forced to quit it anyway.

What an unpredictable career. In that case, what on earth happened in the South? I was suspicious when the guy who had ignored even His Majesty for years suddenly declared he was going to the South. I remember thinking that he mustve another purpose. From the very beginning, was it because of you

Its a long story.

Lil put it that way as it wasnt something she should be sharing in the middle of the forest. She then grabbed the reins of her horse to get going.

Is it because its dangerous?

What?

If so, then I should know too.

Lil climbed onto the saddle of her horse without answering and turned her reins towards the rear of the retreating troops. Soon, Linhardt came alongside her again. The fog cleared and the forest poured out vivid greenery. Even though she breathed in much fresher air than before, the rain fog still filled her.

The one who instigated Maxwells attack was Venua Obernyu, the Prince Regent of Obernyu, and his goal, as everyone knows by now, is to get rid of Edgar.

Prince Regent? Then

My brother.

I dont know why hes acting like this. If I had known

No, declaring I wouldnt have stayed with Ed if I had known, is only in vain

Lil answered as honestly as she could.

Its just that, I wouldve been more careful.

Although Lil was looking ahead, she could feel Linhardts eyes on her. It was a gaze filled with a mixture of concerns about his blood relative, whose life had almost ended by meeting the wrong woman, and his doubts regarding Lil.

Linhardt, who seemed to be choosing his words carefully, finally opened his mouth.

I dont want to be rude, but

Immediately interrupting him, Lil turned to her side and added.

Dont worry. I wont let something like this happen again.

Honestly, its hard to believe. Hes my cousin and he lives on his own terms, so hes at a political disadvantage. Isnt Oberyu a monarchical family with a longer history in the Eastern Principality than the Empire? Your family mustve a lot of influence on Sesbron.

We didnt start this without knowing.

But you didnt know it was going to end up like that, did you?

Do you think Im happy about it? I know that. You wouldnt have been this angry if it was me who broke my arm. Would you like to hear me say the other way around? You dont have to press me for that. I mean, I too will save Edgars life even if it means risking myself being like that.

Linhardt, who looked ahead again, adjusted the reins for no reason.

Well, now that youve said it, not everyone has the guts to fall from a cliff together, especially when the chances of survival are uncertain

Lil reiterated as if she had made a commitment to herself.

Because I vowed to never let him go. Never again

Chapter 309

The Great Trade Route was crowded with merchants and travellers, including both foreigners and citizens of the Empire. No one looked closely at the people or carriages passing by. Because of this, the Duke of Mireille was able to move from Sesbron to the western part of the empire without attracting much attention.

Lifting the curtain inside the carriage, he looked out onto the bustling street. While he hoped that the hotel he would use as accommodation would match his expectations, a sigh escaped his lips. Nonetheless, he didnt regret going through this much hardship.

Mireille became suspicious of Venuas sudden interest in Liloa and immediately investigated the probable cause. Recently, Mireille had become one of the Emperors closest aides, even to the point of being invited for leisure talk in nightwear inside the emperors bedroom, so it was supposedly easy for him to figure out the vague circumstances within the Archdukes domain. However, even though the emperor seemed like a pitiful person who only indulged in food, he was actually quick-witted and suspicious enough for Mireille to know how to quit his probing in moderation.

Yet despite his lack of sufficient information, Mireille held onto his hunch.

For whatever reason, the value of Liloa has skyrocketed, and as a businessman, I should never miss such an opportunity.

This successful merchant trusted his senses.

Thats why I have to get my hands on Liloa before this hunch of mine becomes reality. If a person only moves when theyre sure, theyll be too late.

Fortunately, during his journey towards Roahn, the more news reached his ears, the more he became convinced he wasn't wrong.

[Vouch for my identity]

It was a line from the letter Venua had suddenly sent to him, asking to write him a guarantee of identity.

Of course, nothing was said about Venua's specific location in that letter, but it was obvious. There aren't many people who can and will oppose someone like Venua, a man who not only appears powerful and wealthy, but also lets his temper easily get the best of him and even drags around the dull dogs called the royal guards. Of course, I can't be completely sure who ordered Venua's detainment without assessing the situation in person, but all clues point to the possibility that this arrogant guy found himself stranded after dealing with Roahn's bastard. However, the prospect of them being at each other's throats actually serves my purpose. I can snatch Liloa while they're at it.

While Mireille was lost in his thoughts, the coachman knocked on the window of the carriage.

Uhm, Master

Mireille irritably opened the window.

What?

Jean has arrived. He said his task was completed successfully, but his arrival was delayed because we moved west in a hurry.

As Mireille waved his hand out the window, the coachman stepped back and a man with a shabby appearance came into view. The man bowed and handed Mireille a yellow envelope.

The duke had no intention of blaming the private inspector for being a few days late as long as this man completed his mission well. Instead, he even complimented Jean for being a capable and trustworthy investigator. Showing good faith was, rather than scolding, what Mireille deemed to be the most profitable way to treat Jean. After all, he not only knew how to manipulate people but also how to make himself appear as a charismatic master.

I think this is the most interesting part that happened during the period you asked me to investigate.

Mireille opened the envelope and pulled out the documents.

It appears that the Archduke of Obernyu had secretly tried to adopt a boy. The boy was said to come from a collateral branch of the principality, but this lowly bastard's genealogy wasn't clear. While the boy's last name was Obernyu, the Archduke of Obernyu himself has a history of having 3 or 4 generations of being borne of the most royal blood. This boy, on the other hand, was from a distant bloodline, probably one the Master had never heard of. Not that it matters now anyway, the boy is dead. It's said that he was found in bed one morning with his eyes closed. Many people suspected that the person behind his poisoning was the Prince Regent, Venua Obernyu. And that suspicion wasn't without basis. The Prince Regent is already over 30 years old, alive and well, yet his father adopted a young boy without his knowledge. Anyone can tell that it was for the sake of the Prince Regent's abdication. It seems that the Prince Regent had a serious fallout with the Archduke. I tried, but failed to find out the reason, it seems that only high-ranking people know about it.

Mireille, who had been quietly listening to the report, opened the carriage door and came out. As soon as his white shoes, which he had never seen mud before, landed on the ground, a servant appeared out of nowhere and drew a shade over his head. Passers-by walked past him and took notice of his flashy appearance, so Mireille tried to avoid catching their attention by immediately wearing a simple hat, simple by his standards.

What about the Archdukes mistress?

The Archduke of Obernyu took the Countess of Barre, a widow who had already given birth to six children, as his new mistress. His mistress was the Viscountess de Monttier, who had four sons. Although he selected fertile women, a new mistress is always brought in sooner or later. It looks like conception is failing. As the Master mightve heard, the Archduke has been fighting a disease for a long period of time and his body has become weak to the point he cannot even get out of bed. At first, I had doubts whether making love was even possible

Pfft!

The coachman, listening from the side, choked and burst into laughter before covering his mouth in haste. Jean realised his own error and glanced at the coachman who began walking backwards. But when Mireille didnt respond, he continued his report.

But I guess the sudden attention wasnt part of the Archdukes plans. When it was brought to peoples attention that the normally impenetrable castle walls started seeking only fertile women, they became a laughingstock outside the walls as well. Of course, even the Master mustve heard about this, thats why you told me to investigate

And what about Venua?

Pardon?

Has Venua ever sought a mistress?

There have been mistresses in the past, but there has been no news since his last official one, Miss Louise, was thrown out. Before departing for Sesbron to attend the celebration for the Empires founding, Miss Louise was said to have annoyed him by begging to be taken to court. That was the reason why she was thrown out. She was even kicked out of the castle.

During the Empires founding anniversary

The astute investigator continued.

Yes, if put in chronological order, the incident where the Archduke of Obernyu attempted to adopt a child was after the Prince Regent threw out his last mistress. Afterwards, the adoption failed due to the death of the nominee, and the Archduke quickly took in a new mistress of his own whom he hoped would give birth to a child. Two months later, the Prince Regent came to visit the Master

What about the possibility of the Princess of Sassel becoming pregnant?

She must be infertile. The Prince Regent and his wife, the Princess of Sassel, have had no children for over 15 years now. Even so, I heard that the persecution was severe for an infertile woman marrying into a noble family.

Mireille, who was looking at several pieces of paper in turn, muttered to himself.

No

Sir?

Thats I dont think thats how it is.

Jean looked at his masters unusual expression who then quickly shook his head.

Are you suggesting No way But didnt the Prince Regent have an illegitimate child from a relationship with a mistress?

That child died soon after it was born. And the mistress who gave birth to that child coincidentally died on the same day. Normally, despite it being illegitimate, one should have felt sorry for the death of his child, especially when they had a hard time conceiving for many years, but neither the child nor the mistress was given a funeral, so it kept people talking.

What

I wonder if the child she gave birth to wasnt pure*.

..?

As the corners of Mireilles mouth gradually rose, Jean looked at his masters strange, mysterious smile without answering. Mireille, who had a cigarette in his mouth, chewed the end and muttered.

In that case, is the Princess of Sassel the infertile one?

Lil and Linhardt arrived in front of their lodging in Kano Village. The square, where the imperial troops and prisoners were intertwined, was much more crowded than yesterday. Due to a lack of personnel, even vigilantes were mobilised to stand guard as the remnants of the bandits, the Obernyu group, and the captured smugglers had all gathered in this village, making it comparable to a prison.

Linhardt jumped off the saddle and muttered.

If the scale remains this huge, Sesbron might send an official inspector.

Lil, who had been distracted by other thoughts, raised her head.

Hes right. This is an incident that merits Sesbrons involvement. In fact, representatives might already be on their way now.

Linhardt looked down at her.

Your homecoming is going to be noisy, right?

I originally didnt mean to go in wearing gold*.

Lil glanced at the square before pushing open the front door of the lodging.

Just last night, the villagers were out and about complaining, but perhaps because of the arrival of the Imperial Army, they cant be seen anywhere now.

The dining room on the ground floor, filled with Roahns soldiers and servants, was full of commotion.

The story of Ed falling off a cliff and being seriously injured seems to have spread all over the place.

As Lil entered, gazes were immediately glued onto her.

I thought their curiosity wouldve subsided by now, but thanks to yesterdays commotion, everyone started to become keen on me again

Chapter 310

As many people had been busy coming and going, the carpet on the stairs was a mess of mud and straw. Lil went into the first room and dipped her face in a basin. Even though the water was cold, she rubbed Eds dried blood from her forehead and hair until the water turned faintly red. It was almost as if she was shedding her own blood. When she finally lifted her head, water droplets fell from her chin and nose and fell back into the basin.

Lil stared at the window where she and Ed had kissed just a few hours before.

Think Think, then judge Its time to stop saying I dont know Venuas purpose. What I need to know is which battlefield hes engaging on. Once the battle has already begun, anyone who doesnt know his enemys purpose will inevitably lose Its clear that his tactical objectives are different from his main goal. His short-term objective mightve been Ed, but Ed himself isnt Venuas true goal. And he overlooked something. My brother, who has never been to war, is so naive that he didnt understand not to give his all in just the first battle.

Lil had no intention of letting that one fatal mistake her brother had made go.

Upon stepping outside, she saw Linhardt clearing the ground floor. The soldiers took a rest under his command and the servants busily took care of them. Basins and buckets of water came and went. It wasnt difficult to intuit that the backyard was mostly turned into a public bathhouse by now.

Going down the stairs, she suddenly became aware of the fact that she was starving. As if they knew about her hunger, a fragrant smell of cooking came from the kitchen and wafted through the air.

Linhardt, who eventually spotted Lil, took a few steps closer before opening his mouth.

Would you like to join me to go and eat with Edgar? I know its currently hectic, but its also lunchtime.

No, Ill stay here.

Youre not coming with me?

Im busy. Ill go later in the evening.

Youre busy?

Lil didnt know why Linhardt was questioning her.

Perhaps its surprising to him that I claimed to be busy despite looking so leisurely, or perhaps it surprised him that I seem uninterested in Ed, who had become seriously injured while saving me. In any case, the latter will never be true. Even now, my stomach tightens when thinking back on the sight

I already sent a message to Levi to keep me posted about Edgars condition.

I might not be worried enough to act all sad and unable to do anything but hold Edgars hand, however, Im worried enough in my own way, so dont mind me.

In order to trigger him into further conversation, Lil pulled out the chair opposite Linhardt and sat down. Linhardt, who had been looking down at Lil from a relative height, also took a seat in the end.

Ive been thinking

..?

Lil lifted her body from the backrest and consciously tilted her upper body forward. Her voice lowered.

Maxwell, tell him he could be put to death

Her opponent wasnt surprised in the slightest and casually asked back.

Well proceed with a trial?

Yes.

Linhardt changed his posture and rested his chin. His long fingers stroked along the pale skin of his jawbone.

Ive thought about that too. But the problem is that he doesnt seem to be willing to turn against his master.

Did you appease him?

Of course. But he didnt pay any attention to the options that captive enemy soldiers usually get to choose from.

I think its probably because of his family.

Would the Prince Regent go so far? That cant be. Is Obernyus ruler that ruthless to his own subjects?

Its not that theyre locked up in a prison somewhere, but Maxwells family and friends are in Obernyu. A single decision from Venua could mean hell never see them again. And worse, one word from him could ruin their lives.

Is he that merciless?

Lil shrugged her shoulders.

The waiter from the hotel placed a bowl of soup in front of her. Lil answered while gesturing with her spoon.

I cant deny it.

Without Maxwells cooperation, it will be challenging to prove the accusations addressed at the Prince Regent

Thats true In general, noble families have the privilege of full or partial immunity, so the person who presides over lawsuits between them is the Emperor himself. During the kingdom era, there

were bloody feuds between families, but since the founding of the Empire, the custom of concluding a trial by shedding blood has disappeared. However, the Emperor might reign under the law in writing, he actually conducts above the law in reality. Once the Emperor makes a ruling, the judges closest to him will simply find the corresponding and most convenient law and apply it, making his ruling quite arbitrary. So, in today's period of frequent conflict, people have no choice but to look at the Emperor with one mind.

In addition, the Prince Regent is even the current Emperor's nephew. And between an admiral who had no success in the southern expedition and the Emperor's nephew, public opinion won't be of any help either. It will be easy to pin it all solely on Maxwell during the trial, but I cannot help but think of a way to truly make the most of Maxwell's use. Should I go out of my way to get his family out? I'll try to persuade him.

How?

I've known Maxwell since I was young.

Well, the royal guard isn't a position that requires only one or two years of service, so it makes sense he's been serving your family for quite some time.

Even though he said that, Linhardt didn't seem to trust her very much, and judging from the way he only stirred the content of his bowl with his spoon, unlike Lil who eagerly ate the soup, he seemed to be thinking about another way.

Where's Maxwell by the way?

At the official's residence.

With the others?

Just when Linhardt finally took a spoonful before nodding his head, the main dish was served in front of them, giving off a savoury smell.

Looks like a pork dish flavoured with spices and herbs..!

Lil asked because something came to mind upon seeing the food.

How is this meat here? I thought it was all robbed, did you get it back? If that's the case, did you catch the bandits?

Yes. They were mixed with people whose affiliations are still unclear. There's no benefit for them if they'd lie, and they claimed that there were about three people whom they didn't recognise.

Maxwell may not be the only one from the royal guards then. Or those guys could be mercenaries hired by Venua.

That's right. The puzzle was completed the moment I put Obernyu in as the final piece. There were at least four people, including that man Maxwell, who had infiltrated the bandits. Those were also the ones attacking civilians to lure out Edgar.

So this sounds a bit strange, but did the bandits become collateral damage because of the mercenaries?

You could say so.

And did they hide the stolen items within the village as Edgar suggested?

Yes. I later heard that Maxwell had passed through the village by disguising himself as a merchant.

Then can we say he made a deal with the Imperial Army?

..?

Linhardt raised his head and looked at Lil.

Didnt you mention it was difficult to bring in the Imperial Army and ask for help to catch a group of bandits? Because bandits are supposedly under the Imperial Armys jurisdiction to begin with.

Thats right.

Linhardt put his spoon down again and stroked his chin out of habit.

His Majesty isnt pleased with Roahns rising status. Thats why were refraining from intervening as much as possible in matters or events under the imperial familys jurisdiction. But because of our reputation and influence, people keep seeking for Roahns help whenever something adverse happens on the Great Trade Route.

Lil thought to herself.

I can see the friction. Ed might not care, but the Emperor is clearly fighting a cold war with him.

Even if Roahns soldiers had defeated the bandits, we would only have looked arrogant as if we had overstepped our bounds At least this way, everything turned out okay, right?

Why do you seem so wary of Sesbron?

Im different from Edgar. Im sure you havent forgotten that Im a governor appointed by the Imperial Family. Of course, it was an inevitable choice since I was the only one who could stop Edgar from going too far without causing friction within our family. But at the same time, I was willing to step into the role for practicalitys sake.

For the sake of practicality?

I dont want the Empires trade with the Northern Continent to be cut off.

Lil nodded her head in understanding.

It isnt my intention to dig deeper and find out the complex circumstances within their family. The reason Ed can afford to do things his way is because hes Eichendorffs heir. But of course, other people wouldve to accumulate wealth through trade.